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# WE MEET A SNAKE

By IVAN T. SANDERSON

THE foothills of the Maya Mountains in southern British Honduras are clothed in magnificent jungles. We were living there, technically speaking, I presume, "under canvas"; but this is an elastic term that could only just be deemed to cover our domestic arrangements on this occasion. We spent all day in the open air, but our beds were erected under tar-saturated tarpaulins liberally perforated by small v-shaped rents. It rained a great deal, but by constantly dodging the drips and by a careful arrangement of our possessions we managed to keep dry and get on with our job of examining the animal life that inhabited the place.

One night, shortly after we were well established, my companion, Fred, and I set out upon a night's hunting along one of the rough trails that we had cut for the purpose. This trail bridged the creek by means of a large fallen tree and then plunged into a thick undergrowth full of arching palms. By fording the stream instead of crossing by the bridge as I did, Fred had gained time and entered this palm grove some distance ahead of me. The beam of his torch had momentarily disappeared; so it was that I came upon him most unexpectedly as I rounded the base of a huge dead tree.

He was standing as if frozen, his torchlight concentrated on a point between two of the buttress roots at the base of the tree.

"What is it?" I whispered.

I got no reply, and he continued to stare. Then, all at once, I saw it too. Projecting through a slot-like hole in one

head on to the ground again and hold it down with the gun butt, and all this time Fred was making furious efforts to keep his hand upside down and still retain a grip on the snake.

Yet here again we met a ridiculous problem. The angle at which Fred's hand had to be kept to prevent the poison from running into the cut was so awkward that there appeared to be no way in which he could release the snake so that the head could be pressed down with the gun without a possibly fatal moment during which the animal might give a jerk backwards and plant its fangs in his hand. We attempted all possible positions with a kind of desperation, but to no avail. And still the snake was imperceptibly slipping back, its head retreating by hairsbreadth after hairsbreadth into the palm of poor Fred's hand.

Then we had a brain wave. It came like a refreshing cool blast tingling through my brain. I searched madly through my pockets for a handkerchief and in a second the cool blast melted to a raging furnace. I hadn't one!

"I've got one," said Fred uncannily sensing my object, but I already had my shirttail out. Stripping the whole of this off, I gathered it in hastily at both ends and clamped it into the now gaping mouth of the reptile, and only just in time for it gave a tremendous jerk and Fred let go from pure exhaustion. For an instant, I had the animal suspended by its fangs alone from the sausage of cloth between my hands; then I dropped it and banged my boot boldly down on its neck, ramming it into the earth with my heel.

"Keep your hand down," I yelled, for out of the corner of my eye I saw Fred instinctively raising it to his face.

And so we stood for quite a minute in yet another quandary. Both the guns were now unaccountably out of my reach, and I dared not let Fred move until I could inspect his wound and ascertain to what extent the poison had flowed. This had to be examined first while I remained rooted to the spot covering the reptile's head.



The poison was very close indeed to the wound. So we covered it with two thicknesses of the one precious handkerchief, and Fred retrieved a gun which we planted on the snake's neck with brutal force. Only then did we realize that we were still within calling distance of camp. We let out a concerted howl for our capable assistant, and as soon as he arrived and took charge of the snake, I hurried Fred off to the stream, where we very carefully and thoroughly washed the poison-covered end of his thumb.

When the snake was finally brought in and we examined it by the strong light, we discovered that it was 5 feet, 8 inches of fer-de-lance (*Trimeresurus atrox*) known locally as the "yellow-jawed tommygoff." Its tail was terminated by a sharp, recurved, horny spine, slender and fine and half an inch long. This was what had caused the sharp whirring among the leaves and probably saved us from much direr happenings.

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of the rotten buttresses was a flat, evil head with a pair of obliquely set eyes that stared unflinchingly. It was the business end of a snake, but quite how large a one we did not at that moment realize.

Anybody who has met a poisonous snake has had an adventure in the strict sense of the word. An adventure need not be exciting or dangerous, and the vast majority of encounters with snakes are neither; nor are they humorous or noteworthy enough in any other respect to warrant recounting. What subsequently occurred that night may perhaps be deemed to fall into the class of recountable snake happenings by reason of the quizzical turn that events took.

We wanted this snake, whatever kind it might be, for our collections and so, though we were both armed with shotguns, we encountered rather a problem. How was the specimen to be captured or killed without too much damage? The time-honored method with snakes is to hold them down with a stick, but, although a forest is composed of sticks of all sizes, one that is long enough, yet short enough, and not too rotten for holding down a large snake is a rarity at the best of times and quite certainly not to be found at all when most urgently required. A sapling would have to be felled and cut.

For accomplishing this, the best implement is a machete, but that night we had none. Our only implement was a hunting knife which Fred was carrying, and so, after a hurried and whispered conference, he put down his gun and, selecting a tough, thin bush-stick, began hacking away with the knife. The noise he made and the movement of his light apparently convinced the snake that we meant business or, possibly, that its motionless imitation of a piece of the dead tree had been unavailing. It began to pour through the slot towards us and in the general direction of a thick pile of rubbish into which it might soon disappear altogether. I called to Fred. He looked around hurriedly and uttered a loud oath, which at that time I took for an expression of



annoyance at the ineffectiveness of the knife in cutting the sapling.

At this, the snake began to emerge from the hole even faster and, seeing this, Fred left the sapling and jumped for his gun. At the same time I stumbled round to the right to throw the beam of my torch into the angle between the next two buttresses from which the remainder of the snake was coming.

When I parted the foliage and focussed the beam of light on the tree again, I was amazed to see several feet of snake of considerable girth instead of a couple of feet of moderate dimensions. It struck me, in fact, that it might be only a "wowla," since its back was prominently marked with a pattern not unlike that of the commonest boa found in the country. I called my doubts to Fred and was creeping forward to try to hold the animal down with my gun barrel, when I was brought to an abrupt halt. Almost at my feet a whirring rattle began, much like a rickety dynamo getting under way. I jumped back. Could the snake be a rattler? Were rattlers inhabitants of this country? If not, what could be happening? These questions flashed through my head while I again cautiously advanced and explored the foreground with the light.

The snake's tail was slender and extended from between the buttresses towards me in the mass of dry leaves. It was almost invisible because of the natural camouflage of its coloration, but some three inches of its tip were turned upwards. This slender tip was being violently vibrated by its owner and whirred like a machine among the dead leaves and twigs, But it was not a rattler.

All this maneuvering took but a few seconds, and as soon as I had ascertained that the snake was in all probability poisonous, and mightily so considering its length and girth, I announced to Fred that I was going to shoot it. Moving back as far as I could, I aimed well away from the head, at about the centre of its length, and fired. The whole charge

of small shot found its mark but was not sufficient to ruin the specimen, for it was very stout indeed.

The snake recoiled violently. The hinder portion of its body slumped down in a mass, and it whipped its fore part back through the slot in the buttress. We both jumped forward, and I pushed my gun barrel over the snake's neck. Fred began tearing a long strand of liana from a neighboring tree trunk. From this he was in the process of constructing a tough noose to slip over the writhing animal's head when I had to shout for his help because the powerful brute had begun to squirm free. The great, triangular head, which had been immediately beside my gun barrel, was now more than a foot beyond it. Fred took up his gun, and the snake rounded and struck viciously at my barrel. He opened his jaws to an angle of more than ninety degrees, bared three-quarter-inch fangs and struck again, meeting the hard steel with a whang. As he recoiled, the other gun barrel descended on his neck, but again he snaked through, aided by the soft, resilient bed of leaves below, and I had to jump to hold him down once more. This time, he was better secured, and Fred grabbed him firmly behind the head while I seized up the creeper noose.

That snake was very strong, and the lashings and writhings of its shiny-scaled body made it very hard to hold. I focussed my torch beam on Fred's hand preparatory to slipping on the noose and recoiled with surprise. It was covered with blood!

"Good Heavens! Are you bitten?" I gasped.

"No, I hacked my hand instead of the sapling when you called me," he said.

"Well, look out!" I yelled and, seizing his whole hand, turned it upside down so that the snake's head pointed to the ground. I had seen something that struck horror into me.

Fred had been holding the snake away from him, its head in the air, its body trailing on the ground. He had seized its head from above so that its neck, throat, and



mouth—or rather the roof of its mouth—were directed away from him. The lower jaw of a snake is a loose affair, constructed so that it may stretch when large prey has to be swallowed. The lower jaw was now pressed right out of its normal position by Fred's thumb so that the huge fangs projected over its edge and on to its throat. What I had seen, and Fred had not, was that each time the snake gave a convulsive jerk, a great blob of crystal-clear, yellowish poison squeezed from the tip of its fangs and gathered on Fred's thumb. At the base of that thumb was a cut, an inch long and more than a quarter of an inch deep, which was oozing blood. When I turned over his hand, the poison was already running down the thumb directly towards the cut.

Exactly how bad this poison would be entering a deep, open wound rather than being injected under the skin by the animal's fangs, I did not then know. I later learned from the cautious medical profession that there would have been little difference, but naturally at that moment I was not greatly interested in the mere degree of the risk.

Thus began the quizzical act of this little play. Picture to yourself somebody holding a deadly strip of writhing animation by a yielding and squashy yet slippery extremity in such a position that liquid from that extremity could not run onto his hand; and another body—somewhat agitated, though frightfully eager—skipping around by the light of a torch trying to pop a noose of creeper over said fast-disappearing extremity. As the snake slipped, poor Fred's hand became ever more strained, for the harder he had to grip. The further it went, the less chance I had of getting the noose behind its head and the closer the naked, death-dealing fangs came to Fred's flesh. The scene would have been quite ridiculous to a chance onlooker though it was grim enough to us.

Events moved far faster than this record. But a few seconds were sufficient to show us that it was too late for the noose. The only thing to do was to get the dreadful